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THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

MAURICE MAETERLINCK

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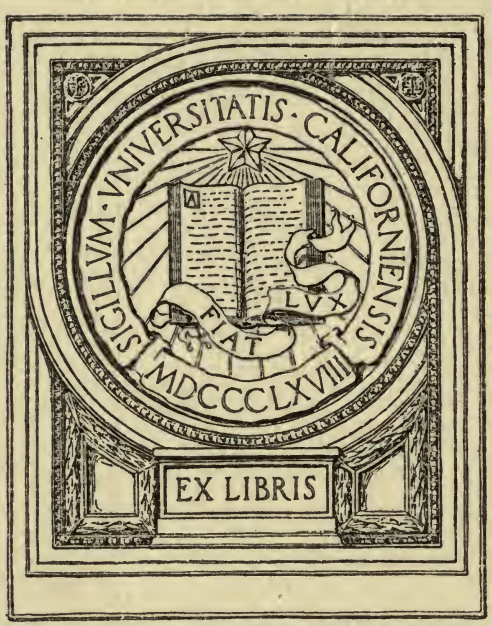
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Maurice Maeterlinck

THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

That Friday, 26th of the month of December, about supper time, a little cowherd came to Nazareth, crying out terribly.

Peasants who were drinking herb-beer at the inn of the "Blue Lion" opened the shutters to look out into the orchard of the village, and saw the child running towards them over the snow. They knew him for Korneliz' boy, and shouted to him through the window: "What is the matter? Off with you to bed!"

But the terrified lad answered that

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the Spaniards were come, that they had fired the farm, hanged his mother among the walnut-trees, and bound his nine little sisters to the trunk of a big tree.

The peasants hurried out of the inn, and crowded round the child and questioned him. He told them further how the soldiers were a-horseback and clad in iron, that they had driven off his uncle Petrus Krayer's cattle, and would soon be got into the forest with the sheep and cows.

All ran to the "Golden Sun," where Korneliz and his brother-in-law were drinking their pot of beer too, and the innkeeper rushed off into the village, shouting that the Spaniards were coming.

Then was there a mighty to-do in Nazareth. The women opened the windows and the peasants ran out of their houses with lights which they extinguished when they reached the orchard, where it was

as bright as midday, because of the snow and the full moon.

They gathered round Korneliz and Krayer on the green in front of the inns. Several had brought their pitch-forks with them and their hay-rakes, and were talking together in frightened voices under the trees.

But as they had no notion what to do, one of them went for the Curé, who owned Korneliz' farm. He came out of his house with the Sacristan carrying the keys of the church. All followed him into the churchyard, and he cried out to them from the top of the tower that he could see nothing in the meadows or the woods, but there were red clouds in the direction of his farm, though the sky was blue and full of stars over all the rest of the countryside.

After holding long debates in the graveyard, they resolved to hide themselves in

the wood which the Spaniards would have to go through, and fall upon them if they were not too numerous, to recover Petrus Krayer's bestial and the booty they had taken at the farm.

They armed themselves with pitchforks and spades, while the women stayed about the church with the Curé.

Searching for a favourable place for their ambush, they came near a mill on the far edge of the forest, and could see the farm blazing against the starlit sky. Then they took post in front of a pool coated with ice, under a clump of enormous oaks.

A shepherd folk called the Red Dwarf went up the hill to warn the miller, who had stopped his mill when he saw the flames on the horizon. However, he let the fellow in, and the two of them stood at a window to look out over the distance.

Away in front the moon was shining down on the fire, and they could see a long procession moving over the snow. When they had well observed it, the Dwarf came down again to those in the woods, and gradually they made out four horsemen, above a flock of beasts that seemed to be cropping the grass.

As they stood at gaze on the edge of the pool and under the trees lighted up by the reflection from the snow, with their blue breeches and red cloaks, the Sacristan showed them a hedge of box, behind which they hid themselves.

The beasts and the Spaniards came on over the ice, and the sheep had reached the hedge and were already beginning to feed when Korneliz broke through the bushes, and the others after him, out into the clear light with their pitch-forks. There was then a great slaughter on the frozen pool, all among the thronging

sheep and the cows that stood staring at the battle and the moon.

When they had killed the men and the horses, Korneliz darted off over the meadows towards the flames, while the others stripped the dead. Then they marched back to the village with the flocks. The women, who had their eyes on the heavy mass of the forest behind the churchyard, saw them emerge from among the trees, and ran forward to meet them with the Curé, and all returned home dancing in great glee, the children and dogs crowding round them.

As they were merrymaking under the pear-trees in the orchard, in which the Red Dwarf hung up lanterns to show it was a *kermesse*, they asked the Curé what they must do next.

They decided at last to harness a waggon to bring to the village the woman's body and her nine little girls.

The dead woman's sisters and other kinswomen of the family got in, along with the Curé, who was ill at walking, being an old man by now and very stout.

They drove into the forest and, without a word said, came in view of the dazzling expanse of the plain; there they saw the men lying naked and the horses where they had fallen on the gleaming sheet of ice among the trees. Then they made on for the farm that was still alight in the middle of the wide country.

On reaching the orchard and the house flaming red, they pulled up outside the gate to contemplate the farmer's dreadful calamity in his garden. His wife was hanging stark naked from the boughs of an immense walnut-tree, and he was mounting a ladder to climb into the tree, round which the nine little girls

stood waiting for their mother on the grass. He was already clambering among the huge branches, when suddenly he saw against the light of the snow the crowd of folks watching him. He beckoned to them to help him, the tears running down his face, and they came into the garden. So then the Sacristan, the Red Dwarf, the landlord of the "Blue Lion," and the landlord of the "Golden Sun," the Curé with a lantern, and a number of others, climbed up into the snow-covered walnut-tree to cut down the dead body, which the women of the village received in their arms.

The next day they buried her, and nothing further out of the common happened at Nazareth that week. But the Sunday following famished wolves scoured the village after High Mass, and it snowed till midday; then the sun shone out suddenly in the sky, and the peasants

returned home to dinner as usual and dressed for the evening office.

For the moment there was nobody on the green, for it was freezing cruelly. Only the dogs and the cocks and hens were straying under the trees, where some sheep cropped a triangle of turf, and the Curé's maid was busy sweeping away the snow in his garden.

Just then a troop of armed men rode over the stone bridge at the bottom of the village and halted in the orchard-close. Peasants came out of their houses, but ran in again panic-stricken to see it was the Spaniards, and took stand at the windows to watch what would follow.

There was a score and a half of horsemen, in armour, round an old man with a white beard. They carried lansquenets on crupper behind them, some in yellow, some in red, who lighted down and ran about in the snow to stretch their legs.

Then they strode off to the inn of the "Golden Sun" and knocked on the door. It was opened after some hesitation, and they went in and warmed themselves by the fire, ordering the innkeeper to draw beer for them.

Presently they came out again with pots and jugs and wheaten loaves for their comrades ranked round the man with the white beard, who sat there waiting in the middle of the spears.

As the street was deserted, the leader sent horsemen behind the houses to guard the village towards the open country, and bade the lansquenets bring before him the children from two years old and under, to slay them.

They went first to the little inn of the "Green Cabbage" and the barber's cottage, standing side by side in the middle of the street.

One of them opened the sty and a

horde of pigs bolted out and scattered through the village. The innkeeper and the barber came out of their houses and asked the soldiers humbly what they wanted; but they knew no Flemish, and tramped in to look for the children themselves.

The innkeeper had one, a little lad that was crying, in his shirt, on the table where they had just had dinner. A man took him in his arms and carried him off under the apple-trees, while the father and mother ran after him crying out.

The soldiers next opened the cooper's cattle-house, and the blacksmith's, and the shoemaker's, and the calves, cows, donkeys, pigs, goats and sheep wandered about the village-green. When they smashed in the glass of the carpenter's shop-window, several peasants, some of the oldest and richest men of the parish, gathered in the street and approached

the Spaniards. They doffed their hoods and felts very respectfully before the leader in his velvet cloak, asking him what he was going to do; but he did not understand their language either, and some one went off to fetch the Curé.

He was getting ready for the evening office and putting on a gold chasuble in the Sacristy. The peasant called out: "The Spaniards are in the orchard-close!" Terrified, he ran to the church door with the choir-boys, who had the tapers and the censer in their hands.

Then he saw the animals from the cattle-sheds trampling about in the snow and on the grass, the horsemen in the village, the soldiers before the doors, the horses tied to the trees down the street, the men and women in supplication round the fellow who was holding the child in its shirt.

He hurried out into the churchyard, and the villagers turned and looked anxiously at their priest, who appeared like a god glittering with gold among the pear-trees, and crowded round him in front of the man with the white beard.

He spoke in Flemish and in Latin, but the leader only shrugged his shoulders lazily to show he could make nothing of it.

His parishioners kept asking him under their breath: "What does he say? what is he going to do?" Others, seeing the Curé in the orchard, began to come timidly out of their farms, women arrived in haste and whispered together in knots, while the soldiers who were besieging an inn ran up at sight of the crowd gathering on the village-green.

Then the man who was holding the child of the landlord of the "Green

Cabbage" by the leg, sliced off its head with his sword.

They saw it tumble down before their eyes, and the body after it, and this lay bleeding on the grass. The mother picked it up and carried it away, forgetting the head. She ran for the house, but stumbled against a tree and fell flat on her face in the snow, where she lay in a swoon, while the father was struggling between two soldiers.

Some of the younger peasants threw stones and pieces of wood at the Spaniards, but the horsemen lowered their spears all together, the women took to their heels, and the Curé began to scream with horror along with his parishioners, all in the middle of the sheep, the geese and the dogs.

But presently, as the soldiers went off again down the street, they fell silent to see what they meant to do next.

The band marched into the shop kept by the Sacristan's sisters, then came out again quietly without hurting the seven women who were on their knees, praying, on the doorstep.

Next they went to the inn where the Hunchback of St. Nicholas, as he was called, was landlord. There too the door was opened directly, not to anger them; but here they reappeared amid a mighty uproar, with three children in their arms, and surrounded by the Hunchback, his wife and his daughters, who were begging mercy with clasped hands.

On coming up to the old man, they flung down the children at the foot of an elm, where they stayed, sitting on the snow in their Sunday clothes. But one of them wearing a yellow frock got up and tottered off towards the sheep. A soldier ran after it with a naked sword, and the child died, its face buried in the

grass, while they were killing the others round the tree.

All the peasants and the innkeeper's girls took flight with piercing shrieks and scurried back to their farms. Left alone in the orchard, the Curé cried and howled to the Spaniards for mercy, crawling on his knees from one house to another, his arms extended in a cross, while father and mother, sitting in the snow, wept piteously over their dead children where they lay stretched across their knees.

Going up and down the street, the lansquenets noticed the big house of a farmer painted blue. They tried to beat in the door, but it was of oak and studded with nails. So they took some casks frozen in a pool before the door-step and used them to clamber up to the upper floor, where they got in by a window.

There had been a *kermesse* at the

farm, and kinsfolk had been invited to come and eat waffles, cheesecake, and ham with their little ones. At the noise of the broken glass they had mustered behind the table, littered with jugs and dishes. The soldiers pushed their way into the kitchen, and after a great battle, in which several were wounded, they laid hold of the little boys and little girls, as well as the hind, who had bitten a soldier's thumb, and so out again, shutting the door behind them to hinder the folks inside from going with them.

Those of the villagers who had no children crept one by one out of their houses and followed after them at a distance. When they arrived before the old man, carrying their victims, they threw them down on the grass and killed them at their ease, using their spears and swords, while all along the front of the blue-painted house the men and women,

leaning out of the windows of the upper floor and the garrets, were cursing and swearing and waving about their arms madly in the sun, as they saw their little ones, in their red, pink, or white frocks, lying stark and still on the grass under the trees. Then the soldiers hanged the hind from the sign of the "Half Moon" on the other side the street; and a long silence fell upon the village.

Now the slaughter began to spread farther afield. The mothers would bolt from the houses, and darting across flower-gardens and kitchen-plots would run for the open country; but the horsemen pricked after them and hounded them back into the street. Then men, their hoods betwixt their clasped hands, would drag themselves on their knees after the soldiers who were carrying off their children, while the dogs barked gleefully round them in the general

uproar. The Curé, his arms lifted to heaven, was running alongside the houses and under the trees, praying despairingly like a martyr, and soldiers, shivering with cold, blew their fingers as they moved about the road, or hands in the pocket of their trunks and sword under arm, stood waiting under the windows of the houses which their comrades were scaling.

Seeing the grief and terror of the peasants, they began to force their way into the farm-houses in little bands, and all down the street the same scenes were a-doing. A market-garden woman who lived in the old red-brick cottage near the church had a chair, and was running after two fellows with it, who were wheeling off her children in a barrow. She fell sick when she saw them die, and they sat her in the chair, against a tree by the roadside.

Other soldiers climbed up into the

lindens in front of a farm-house painted lilac, and stripped off some of the tiles to gain an entrance. When they came out on the roof again, the father and mother appeared too, stretching up their arms, in the opening, and they forced them back several times over, slashing them over the head with their swords, before they could come down into the street.

One family, imprisoned in the cellar of a very big cottage, was crying and lamenting at the vent-hole, through which the father brandished a pitchfork in blind fury. A bald-headed old man sat sobbing all by himself on a dunghill; a woman in yellow had fallen in a faint on the green, and her husband was holding her up under the armpits, and crying out, in the shade of a pear-tree; another woman, in red, was kissing her little girl, who had no hands now, and kept lifting up the two stumps, first one

and then the other, to see if she would not move. Another escaped into the open, and the soldiers were chasing her among the hay-ricks, on the sky-line of the snowy fields.

Round the inn of the *Four Sons Aymon* was to be seen all the to-do of a regular siege. The inhabitants had barricaded themselves inside, and the soldiers were prowling round the building without being able to force an entrance. They were trying to clamber up the espaliers on the house-front and so mount to the sign-board when they saw a ladder behind the garden door. They clapped it against the wall, and up they went in single file. But then the innkeeper and all his family pitched out of window at them tables and chairs, crockery and cradles. The ladder upset, and the soldiers tumbled down again.

In a boarded hut at the far end of

the village, another band had come upon a peasant-woman bathing her children in a tub before the fire. Being old and almost deaf, she never heard them come in. Two soldiers laid hold of the tub and carried it off, and the woman ran after them, all amazed, with the little ones' clothes, wanting to dress them. But at the doorstep, when of a sudden she saw the splashes of blood in the village, the naked swords in the orchard-close, the women on their knees and others tossing their arms round the dead babes, she set up a dreadful cry, striking at the soldiers, who put down the tub to defend themselves. The Curé ran up too, and clasping his two hands over his chasuble, implored the Spaniards there before the naked children sobbing in the water. Then more soldiers came, who pulled him away and tied the raving woman to a tree.

The butcher had hidden his little girl, and was looking on indifferently, his back against the wall of his house. A lansquenet and one of the men in armour pushed their way in and discovered the child in a copper cauldron. Then the butcher, driven desperate, picked up one of his knives and chased them into the street; but a band that was passing by disarmed him, and hung him up by the wrists to the hooks in the wall, between the flayed carcases of meat, where he kicked his heels and jerked his head, cursing and swearing, till night.

Near the churchyard there was a great crowd before a long, low farm-house, painted green. The farmer was at his door, weeping hot tears; as he was a very fat fellow, with a merry face, some soldiers sitting in the sun under the wall were listening to him pityingly, patting the dog the while. But the man who

was dragging away the child by the hand was making signs as much as to say: "What would you have? it's no fault of mine!"

Another peasant, hotly pursued, jumped into a boat moored to the stone bridge, and pushed off into the lagoon with his wife and children. Not daring to venture on the ice, the soldiers stamped angrily up and down among the rushes. They scrambled up into the willows on the bank to try and reach them with their spears, but they could not; so they stayed a long while, threatening them all where they sat cowering in the middle of the pool.

The orchard, meantime, was still crowded with folk, for it was there they killed the most part of the children, in front of the man with the white beard who presided over the massacre. The little boys and little girls who were old

enough to walk alone were mustered there too, and looked on curiously to see the others die, munching slices of bread and butter for their midday snack, or gathered round the parish idiot, who was sitting on the turf playing the flute.

Then suddenly a long line of people was seen moving up the village. The peasants were running towards the castle, which stands on a high mound of yellow earth at the end of the street. They had caught sight of the Baron leaning over the battlements of his tower, from which he was looking down at the massacre. And men, women, and greybeards, with uplifted hands, made supplication to him as to a king in heaven, standing there in his mantle of violet velvet and his gold bonnet. But he only threw up his arms and shrugged his shoulders, in token he could do nothing, and as they besought

him more and more despairingly, with bared heads, kneeling in the snow and uttering loud and terrible cries, he went back again slowly into the tower, and the peasants lost all hope.

When all the children were killed, the tired soldiers wiped their swords on the grass and supped under the pear-trees. After this, the lansquenets mounted again on crupper, and all together they rode out of Nazareth by the stone bridge, as they had come.

Then the sun set behind the woods, colouring the trees red and throwing a new light over the village. Weary with much running and begging mercy, the Curé had sat down in the snow in front of the church, and his maidservant with him, both staring into the dusk. They could see the street and the orchard-close crowded with peasants in their gala dresses, moving about on the green and

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beside the houses. Some families, holding their dead child across their knees or in their arms, were telling over the tale of their misery in dazed voices before the doors. Others were still crying over their little one where it had fallen, alongside a cask, under a barrow, at the edge of a pool, or were carrying the body home without a word. Not a few were already busy washing the benches, chairs, tables, shirts smirched with blood, and gathering up the cradles that had been pitched into the street. But nearly all the mothers were crying and sobbing under the trees, in front of the dead babes stretched on the grass, each recognising her own by their woollen shifts. Those who had no children were roaming about the green and stopping to gaze at the sorrowing groups. The men who had dried their tears had taken the dogs and were chasing their strayed beasts, or

repairing their broken windows and gaping roofs, while the village was settling down into stillness under the bright beams of the moon that slowly climbed up the sky.

MOORIS MAETERLINCK.

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